

Submission to the Task Force on Safe Participation in Political life

Introduction

This submission is intended to outline the findings and recommendations of **the Forum on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament** as they relate to the **Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life**. The Forum was set up by the Ceann Comhairle, Sean O Fearghail, in March 2021. Fifteen members were appointed to the Forum. All meetings of the Forum had to be held remotely during Covid. Twenty-two guest speakers made presentations to online meetings. In addition, a total of 43 written submissions were received from internal and external stakeholders.

The final report was submitted to the Ceann Comhairle in November 2022. Following the submission of the report, the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission set up a Steering Group to examine, assess and implement the 51 recommendations of the Forum. Three sub-committees were developed and chaired at Principal Officer level to cover the areas of (1) parliamentary procedure, (2) human resources and (3) facilities.

Relevant recommendations

Many of the contributions/submissions to the Forum referred to the negative and damaging effects of harassment of elected representatives and their staff, including those working within Leinster House as well as those managing constituency offices. On-line abuse, stalking and physical threats were recorded in a number of the submissions.

The recommendations of particular relevance to Safe Participation in Public Life include those that reference (a) the personal security of members and their staff (b) a review of existing codes of conduct on appropriate behaviour for Members and sanctions for breaches of those codes and (c) a three-year review to inform the implementation of the revised Dignity and Respect Statement of Principles and Policy.

Key Issues

In providing a summary of recommendations, the Forum set out some priority areas for attention. Included in those priority recommendations was one entitled “Measures to ensure personal safety of Members and their staff.” Under that general heading, three Priority Recommendations were identified in the report - Priority Recommendations 24,25 and 26. (Pages 30-31 of the published report.)

The Forum heard that Members of the Oireachtas and their staff encounter abusive and threatening communications from the public, particularly on social media platforms. It was also reported that while supports are available through the Workplace Assistance Programme for Members, political staff and their families, sometimes there are issues accessing these supports. The Forum recommended a review of the accessibility of the services and furthermore, that newly elected Members be provided with additional supports to address their safety and security.

Priority Recommendation 24 reads as follows: *Provide appropriate personal security for Members and their staff. Establish dedicated supports for Members and their staff facing online abuse and harassment- -technical as well as mental health supports. Additional supports to be made available for newly elected members (Recommendation 24 of the published report -Oireachtas website).*

Recommendations 25 and 26 of the Forum report reflected on the Dignity and Respect Statement of Principles and Policy as the standard for everyone in the Parliamentary Community to prevent (a)bullying, harassment and sexual harassment in the parliamentary workplace and (b) deal with complaints. In 2019, a survey was carried out as part of the implementation of the policy. Of those responding to the survey, 78% felt the Oireachtas was a safe place to work, 15% experienced bullying, 8% harassment, and 3% sexual harassment. However, the majority of those experiencing bullying did not formally report the behaviour, as they felt reporting it would be ineffective or they feared repercussions.

Priority Recommendation 25 reads as follows: *By September 2022, review existing codes of conduct on appropriate behaviour for Members of the Houses of the Oireachtas and set out clear sanctions for breaches of these codes.*

(Recommendation 25 of the published report – Oireachtas website)

Priority Recommendation 26 reads as follows: *From 2022, conduct surveys of Members, parliamentary staff, political staff and contractors at 3year intervals to inform the ongoing implementation of the revised dignity and Respect Statement of Principles and Policy and to review the accessibility of all supports.*

(Recommendation 26 of the published report – Oireachtas website)

Update on implementation of recommendations

As Chair of the Forum, I continue to engage with the Ceann Comhairle on progress of the recommendations of the Forum. The following is a summary of the progress.

- Additional training has been provided, and funding offered, to Members for their personal safety.
- The Ceann Comhairle met with female TDs in February 2023 to discuss increasing levels of abuse and harassment that they receive. Arising from this engagement with the female TDs, your “*Task Force on Safe participation in Political life*” was established.”
- A representative Dignity and Respect Steering group has been established to champion and oversee the operation of the Dignity and Respect Policy for Members.

In addition to the specific measures listed above, the implementation of a number of the remaining recommendations, designed to make the Oireachtas a more “family friendly and inclusive Parliament”, will have a positive impact on the working conditions of the people employed in the Oireachtas. These include:

- An updated attendance policy has been published, which provides for increased flexibility in core working hours to assist managers to address long working hours of staff on an ongoing basis, and where required to agree rosters or rotas as appropriate to the work of the section.
- A Blended Working Policy was published in the Summer of 2022, which has enabled many staff members to avail of up to 3 days per week working from home.
- A Right to Disconnect Policy was approved by the Management Board in April 2023
- A Compensatory Leave Policy has been approved by the Management Board, to provide a formal, transparent approach to providing compensatory leave for staff who work long hours in the performance of their parliamentary duties.
- The reversion to pre-Haddington Road work hours commenced on 1 July 2022, and flexitime has been restored for grades up to and including HEO.

While the four recommendations listed above are not directly related to Safe Participation, they are nevertheless very important in endeavouring to make the working environment more attractive and family friendly. It would be hoped that those working in the Oireachtas, or those contemplating a career related to politics, would be reassured that their safety and wellbeing is a priority issue.

Conclusions

The Forum made a total of 51 recommendations to the Ceann Comhairle. I have selected what I consider to be the most relevant to the Task Force and outlined the current progress on those. The Ceann Comhairle has met with me regularly to update me on the progress of the recommendations. Recently he circulated an update to all members of the Forum and has committed to continue to keep all Members informed of developments.